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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses philosophical and ethical issues regarding school-to-work issues in public education. The purpose of school-to-work programs is to help students obtain employment. This paper asserts that schools should prepare students for work, but the concept of "work" entails much more than just securing employment. School-to-work programs are designed for populations in metropolitan areas and are not geared for the needs of rural communities and rural populations. For instance, school-to-work programs prepare students for high-tech, high-paying jobs. In contrast, the future job market in rural West Virginia involves low-skill, low-wage, and part-time employment. In a four-county area experiencing rapid growth in West Virginia, the outlook for future jobs focuses mainly on food preparation, guard work, and home health care. In addition, it appears that there may not be enough job growth in West Virginia to sustain the employment of all high school and postsecondary graduates. The bottom line is that while job holding may be a defendable goal in urban areas, it may not be relevant to the differing nature of "work" in rural areas and can easily become another means for sorting students into vocational and academic tracks. In addition, school-to-work programs encourage students to leave rural areas in search of high-tech, high-paying jobs. In order to preserve rural communities, school-to-work programs need to promote community stewardship and a sense of community among students. Such aims have to do with larger purposes and commitments that are worthy to be the object of true education. (LP)

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A Differing Perspective

Invited Workshop Contribution
Cabell-Wayne Phi Delta Kappa
Wayne Middle School, Wayne, WV
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Ethics and the Proper Aims of School-to-Work in Rural Places:

A Differing Perspective

I, too am thankful for being invited to speak with you tonight, and for three reasons. First, I muddled my way through my doctoral program. Second, I still haven't chosen a career. And third, I get to talk about something I don't usually get invited to talk about. The talk is divided into three parts--general matters, specific matters, and a combination of both. Let me say at the outset that I'm not opposed to school-to-work per se. In the 1950s there was a special curriculum for the very kids targeted by School-to-Work, the so-called 'life adjustment curriculum.' It's purpose was to teach just those kids to do nothing. School-to-Work strikes me as a more humane alternative. But I have concerns that I want to share with you. These concerns are billed as 'philosophical' and we all know that philosophy has it's various parts--politics, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics. My remarks focus on ethics.

General Matters

I'm not going to talk specifically about Senate Bill 300, but I do work closely with someone who is much concerned with school-to-work issues, and we've talked a lot about relevant issues and come to some common understandings. The second part of these brief remarks--specific issues--deals with some of those common understandings. The remarks are

written and read, by the way, to help me make the most of a few minutes. I'm just not able to speak very well about vague things like philosophy otherwise.

General Matters

The first thing I want to deal with is why we're talking at all about School-To-Work. It's usually spelled the way it appears in my notes--hyphenated and with all capital letters. This is the way we spell things intended to command allegiance, especially among the skeptical.

In fact, the reason we're talking about it is obvious, and it's the same reason we talk like this about many things in education and throughout our society generally--the love of money. And I don't have to remind you about the distinction between money, which we all need, and the love of money, which wreaks havoc with the way we think.

Part of the problem with government in the modern world that it's too big--nations are too big, corporations are too big, cities are too big, school districts are too big, hospitals are too big, and so forth. In their, or rather in our Bigness--because our governments do represent us--governments take the base and cynical view that bribing constituents is good policy.

In effect, we've been bribed to have this discussion and do this work. There lots of other examples--in West Virginia, for instance, consolidation is accomplished with bribes. The policy literature, of course, has a more neutral word than "bribes," that is: "incentives." Incentives of this sort invite us to violate good sense.

Where's the mischief, you ask? It's simple, bribes motivate our speech, our speech motivates our thinking, and, very quickly, we start to lie to each other and then to ourselves. Telling the difference between the approximately true, the truly uncertain, and the certainly

untrue becomes more work than it's worth. So we give up altogether and go with the flow.

The great psychologist and practical philosopher of education, Jerome Bruner, had this to say about what all this has to do with the business of education--

> I have often thought that I would do more for my students by teaching them to write and think in English than teaching them my own subject. It is not so much that I value discourse to others that is right and clear and graceful...as that practice in such discourse is the only way of assuring that one says things right and courteously and powerfully *to oneself*. For it is extraordinarily difficult to say foolishness clearly without exposing it for what it is.

And this guy teaches at Harvard, let's remember. Of course, it's probably worse up there than down here.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not attacking the idea that education is supposed to help kids make the transition to adulthood. What bothers me is our tendency--along lines suggested by bribery--that the end of education, the purpose or aim of education, is jobholding. Senate Bill 300, of course, is dubbed "The Jobs Through Education Act." Now, I realize that the inventors of STW have better intentions. The trouble is not intentions, and the trouble is also not implementation.

The trouble is our ignorance and our very narrow thinking. Politicians get elected by promising to create jobs, something they can hardly ever do. The economy creates jobs, not politicians. And education is not going to create jobs either. Jobs, for another thing, involve

very small functions; they involve only parts of who we are and what we can do. Surely we don't expect there will be enough high-tech jobs to go around. What then are we suggesting, that schools prepare kids to wage a cut-throat battle to beat out the next job applicant. If they follow our lead, and the lead of our leaders, they will probably resort to bribery to get some of those jobs. That's how it works in the so-called "developing nations." Don't think that it can't happen here. It can. In some ways it already is.

Schools should prepare kids for work. But we've got to re-think our concept of "work." Work has got to be something more than jobholding.

Specific Matters

Here's a relevant concept that no one has ever heard of, at least according to data I've gathered in West Virginia. "Rural." We combine this unknown concept with a national program like School-To-Work and we're asking for trouble.

School-To-Work is not a program designed with rural in mind. It's designed with the nation in mind, and 75% of the nation is metropolitan.

What's the problem? In 1908, 60% of Americans lived in rural places. In 1917, it was 50%, in 1940 40%, in 1980 25%. The rate of rural disappearance is slowing, actually. There was a nationwide reversal in the 1970, decline again in the greed decade of the 1980s, and a net gain again in the 1990s, so far. Rural is here to stay. Reasons are partly economic, but partly they have to do with what people value. More on that in the last part of this quick talk.

I've got some handouts. They provide the data and the ideas to establish my points. First, rural jobs of the future in West Virginia are not high-tech, high-skill. They are mostly low-

skill, low-wage, and they may be parttime. It even appears that there may not be enough job growth to sustain the employment of everyone who graduates from high school and postsecondary schooling. In the handouts you'll see that in West Virginia and in a four-county region that includes Putnam and Kanawha counties--the boom areas in the state--the big jobs of the future for us will be in food preparation, guardwork, and as 'home-health aides.' It doesn't make sense to prepare anyone extensively for these jobs, except maybe kids in sheltered workshops, and even if you think of 'career clusters' it doesn't make much sense. What's the career cluster for food preparation? Hotel and Restaurant management? That should be the point of an education? I can't imagine that's even a very widely attractive bribe, especially for adolescents.

The research article talks about these dilemmas, based on data gathered in rural Arizona. Employers wanted to do their own training, preferred not to have schools do it. They wanted polite, responsible kids who would show up to work on time. But the researcher found, as anyone who's reached the age of 30 and traveled with eyes open through a number of organizations would find, that some places offered decent jobs with scope for self-improvement and friendly relations with co-workers, whereas others offered crummy jobs that tended to diminish workers' capacities rather than enhancing them.

The bottom line is that, whereas jobholding might be a defendable goal in footloose urban America, where there are more high-tech jobs, School-To-Work can easily become another plan to fix the sorting machine. That's already the problem with vocational education, academic education, and so-called 'alternative' schools. We want to smash the sorting machine for good, don't we?

The key question for rural people to answer, if they want to do some good and not some more harm with School-To-Work, is to ask what 'work' means in rural places. Obviously, I've got some ideas.

Putting It Together

Rural places, even though predicted to survive into the foreseeable future, are still in great jeopardy. They are colonies to the cities; they supply raw materials and cheap labor. It's always been this way, and there is a substantial literature on this fact. To an extent, the Appalachian Regional Commission realized this when they built the interstates. Places like Charleston and Knoxville and Roanoke have benefitted.

So low-wage, routine jobs are the likely future of rural areas. I know that people dream of telecommuting, but there is every reason to expect that tele-jobs in rural areas will be routine and not high-wage: cities being the engines of economic growth and rural areas being the favored site for routine production throughout history.

Some other sort of work is necessary in rural places. And to appreciate this sort of work you need to give up the idea that jobholding is the all-important end of existence. Earning--or, more properly, making-- a living is very important, to be sure, for individuals. But equally important to the very survival of rural places is the development of community. And if School-To-Work simply prepares kids to seek high-tech, high-wage jobs they will abandon their communities. And that's been going on across the entire 20th century.

The sort of work that School-To-Work ought to be encouraging in rural areas is community stewardship, thoughtful care for local places; the sort of caring that leaves a place

better off than we found it. The last item in my handouts is an ERIC Digest by Bruce Miller, and it talks about the role of education in rural community development.

This is a radical change, to be sure, in the concept of work. It's more like a calling, a life's work; it has religious overtones, even. Bribes won't work in this context, partly because community is not something seen, but also because the effect of bribes is only to destroy what people have in common.

Most importantly for any of us who want to be called "educators" is that work that aims at community stewardship has to do with larger purposes and commitments that are worthy to be the object of true education. Thanks for your attention.

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